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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001387

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL ECON KS KN
SUBJECT: DPRK PLOTTED CAPTURE OF U.S. JOURNALISTS

REF: A. SHENYANG 119
1B. SHENYANG 142

Classified By: POL M/C James L. Wayman. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. The DPRK's arrest of U.S. journalists Laura Ling and Euna Lee in March 2009 was an orchestrated part of Pyongyang's broader pattern of belligerent behavior in the first half of 2009, according to "Aquariums of Pyongyang" author and DPRK gulag survivor Kang Chol-hwan. Kang, citing his own security force contacts within China and North Korea, said DPRK intelligence officers bribed the journalists' Chinese guide to take them to a location along the DPRK border where the two could be apprehended easily. DPRK security services had been directed to find foreign journalists to detain, primarily Americans, Japanese and South Koreans. Kang asserted that market forces are behind the recent drop in volume of refugees attempting to cross the border because the bribes border guards are "charging" are too high. New directives from Pyongyang have forced border guard unit commanders, who previously kept bribe money to themselves, to share profits with their subordinates to keep their mouths shut. Kang related that at least one DPRK border guard unit had a collective goal of "earning" 100,000 USD from would-be border crossers. COMMENT: We have no way to independently confirm Kang's information, but in the past have found him to be a reliable interlocutor. The reported rise in the cost of exiting the DPRK appears to be a result not of tighter security but rather a further breakdown in regime security and the institutionalization of corruption and human trafficking. It also may help explain the phenomenon reported by CONGEN Shenyang (ref A) in which the socio-economic status of recent border crossers appeared to be higher than in the past, as currently only elites may be able to afford the bribes being demanded by border guards.
End summary and comment.

Downplays Effect of Arrests

12. (C) Kang Chol-hwan, Vice-Chairman of the Committee for the Democratization of North Korea and a survivor of the DPRK's notorious Yodok labor camp, met with poloffs August 27 to provide his take on current conditions facing refugees attempting to flee the DPRK. Kang observed that DPRK treatment of people caught attempting to cross into China has changed little in recent months, but the amount needed to pay off border guards has gone from 300 to 1,000 USD. (Comment: Other Embassy contacts claimed the average bribe demanded is now as high as 2,000 USD, underscoring the point that with money anything is possible in the DPRK. End comment.)

Contrary to recent reports in the Western press, Kang asserted that the arrests of the two American reporters would have little long-term effect on refugee flows or the security situation along the Sino-Korea border. While critical of their professional carelessness in failing to better protect their sources, Kang said the journalists were victims of a DPRK plot to manufacture a crisis as part of the regime's broader display of provocative behavior in the first half of 2009.

DPRK Plotted to Detain Journalists

13. (C) Going into more detail, Kang claimed that DPRK security forces in early 2009 had been looking for foreigners to essentially take hostage. Kang cited as his source a PRC Public Security Bureau (PSB) official in Northeast China whom he knew well and who had close contact with DPRK security forces. Kang said that DPRK intelligence services were well aware of the activities of foreigners along the Chinese border and had been directed to round up foreign journalists, particularly Americans, South Koreans and Japanese. Kang noted that one attempt to detain Japanese journalists went awry when the Japanese learned of the ruse in advance. Kang claimed that DPRK security forces had distributed to its agents and trusted PSB officials in Northeast China a "wanted list" detailing bounties they could receive for assisting in the apprehension of certain categories of persons and named individuals. The Chinese PSB contact told Kang that the bounty for him was 100,000 USD, darkly joking that the high-profile defector should "come back for a visit."

Market Forces at Work Along Border

14. (C) Market forces and a worsening food situation for the DPRK military have combined to undermine border security, according to Kang. Prior to North Korea's second nuclear test, DPRK guards had kept the border so tight that "even an ant could not get through." However, the need to earn hard currency meant that the border guards ultimately had no choice but to accept bribes from border crossers. Kang asserted that over time the bribes demanded would come down in price as guards realized they were charging too much, in effect discouraging much-needed customers. The border guards' desperate need for food would also work to lower the going rate.

Pyongyang's Retrenchment Counterproductive

15. (C) Pyongyang has attempted to curb bribery by allowing rank and file guards to skip the chain of command and report on their commanders for accepting bribes, according to Kang. He explained that originally only unit commanders had the authority to release illegal border crossers, meaning that they had the opportunity to pocket the most bribes. This direct reporting system has dramatically raised the cost of an average bribe because commanders now have to share the profits with their underlings to avoid being reported -- and possibly executed. Kang said his PSB contact was aware of at least one border guard unit that had set a collective goal to "earn" 100,000 USD by bribing DPRK citizens wishing to cross into China.

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